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Silius Italicus' "Punica": Rome's war with Hannibal

Antony Augoustakis, Neil W. Bernstein, *Silius Italicus' "Punica": Rome's war with Hannibal*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 334. ISBN 9781138291454 $128.00.

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Preview

Even a cursory reading of this new translation of Silius Italicus' *Punica* by Antony Augoustakis and Neil Bernstein, two of the major scholars of Flavian epic, reveals that it aims for readability, comprehensibility, accessibility, and relevance while it endeavors to provide for a version in English that is as faithful as possible to the meaning of the original Latin text. Augoustakis and Bernstein direct their prose translation of the Latin text specifically at Anglophone undergraduate students (p. 5), though it will suffice equally for the scholar. The explanatory footnotes by Augoustakis will prove especially helpful to the target reader. While there is a glossary at the back to make the meaning of various references in the text clear for readers, Augoustakis and Bernstein also provide periphrases and simplified names to assist in the process of identification and understanding for students who lack familiarity with either the language or culture of Rome (cf. pp. 5–6).

In addition to the aforementioned contextual aids, Augoustakis furnishes a concise but useful introduction that discusses Silius' life and career, the structure of the *Punica*, its sources, heroes, and the text and translation (pp. 1–6) ; the introduction also includes a short bibliography for further reading (pp. 6–7). In short, Augoustakis and Bernstein do everything possible to make both students and scholars comfortable reading the translation in front of them. Although the introduction points out that Bernstein translated books 1–2, 4–5, and 7–11, while Augoustakis was responsible for the translation of books 3, 6, and 12–17 (and the "Introduction" and notes), their translations are virtually indistinguishable from one another, which is perhaps due to the fact they each read and edited each other's work (p. 6). In the interests of clarity and intelligibility, both Augoustakis and Bernstein divide the *Punica*'s longer periods into shorter English sentences.

Complete translations of Silius Italicus' late first-century *Punica* since the eighteenth century have been few and far between, especially in comparison with other Roman epics. While this may be partly due to the fact that the *Punica* is much longer than other Roman epics, the main reason is that for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Silius' *Punica* was disparaged as a poetic achievement. This is despite the fact that the *Punica* relates the history of the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage (218–201 bce), which features one of the most famous wars in Rome's history and one of its most prominent adversaries in the figure of Hannibal. For scholars studying later Republican and Imperial views on this war, the *Punica* stands alongside works by Livy and other writers as a valuable source.

Silius Italicus was a popular poet before the mid-nineteenth century, however, which is reflected not only in the publications of numerous editions of the *Punica* but also in the various translations of the *Punica* that appeared in the vernacular (English, Italian, French, German, and Spanish). Complete translations of the *Punica* were published in English by Thomas Ross (London 1661) and Henry Tytler (Calcutta 1828), while an unpublished English translation by Chase (1756) appeared in the intervening century. As a result of the unstinting criticism of Silius Italicus that prevailed during the Victorian period, translations of the *Punica* simply dried up, with the result that after the translation of Tytler no complete English translation of the epic appeared for over a century until the the well-known and often-used Loeb English translation of the epic by J. D. Duff (London 1934).

Duff's prose translation of the *Punica* served Anglophone scholars and students for many decades, but as time passed its obsolete style, archaic expression, and occasional misunderstanding of the Latin, made it increasingly apparent that another translation was needed for a new generation of readers. In a chapter on Silius in 2010, I wrote, "Much corrective and innovative work remains to be done. A translation of the *Punica* is needed in English, preferably matching the Latin line by line" ("The Modern Reception of Silius Italicus," *Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus*, p. 446). Finally, a verse translation of the *Punica* (though not line for line) by A. S. Kline (2018) appeared online, now followed by this prose translation of Antony Augoustakis and Neil Bernstein.

Any translation, whether prose or verse, not only involves a series of choices and sacrifices, but it also serves as an ideological commentary upon and pseudo-interpretation of the original text. There are four basic forms of translation that have been used most often to translate Latin epic into English (see also the first paragraph of Godwin, *BMCR2021.04.22*): prose, blank verse (blank iambic pentameters), free or "loose" verse, and the dactylic hexameter. Prose is the form that the majority of translators of Latin epic have chosen owing to its simplicity and nonnecessity of fitting the English to a rigid or even flexible verse form. Blank verse has been another popular option owing to its association with English epic, notably John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but this choice has always been unfortunate for a few reasons (cf. Dominik, *BMCR 1993.03.20*): first, the use of blank verse results in an excessive expansion of the number of English lines in comparison with the original Latin verse; secondly, the English blank verse form conveys the appearance of being prose adapted to fit the decasyllabic line,

since the constraints of the verse-line frequently result in the need to break off in the middle of English sentences and phrases at the end of lines; and thirdly, the strict prosody of decasyllabic verse creates a false impression of the rigidity of the Latin dactylic hexameter (as does the use of the dodecasyllabic line or any other verse involving a fixed number of syllables).

The use of "free" or "loose" verse consisting of, for example, a flexible iambic line or other verse form of wide variation in the number of syllables, is also ill-suited to convey the more limiting form of the Latin dactylic hexameter. Even though there is the appearance of discipline when a "loose" verse translation contains as many lines in the translation as in the original text, this depends upon whether there is the same (or a similar) number of feet in each line. Robert Frost famously remarked, "I'd as soon as write free verse as play tennis with the net down" (cited by Berry, *Robert Frost on Writing* [1973] 159). The lack of structure and discipline evident in the practice of free verse, which can afford the appearance of written prose chopped into lines of roughly similar length, is still preferable to the prose form since it at least conveys the sense or "feeling" of verse, if not necessarily its meter or stress. Finally, a modified "vernacular" dactylic hexameter as the mode of translation has been used (and is discussed below).

Augoustakis and Bernstein's choice of prose over verse as the form of translation for Silius Italicus' *Punica* is consequential. Augoustakis maintains on their behalf that prose is a more suitable form for a modern readership unfamiliar with a long epic poem in English (p. 5), but this depends upon the specific texts being considered. The choice of prose immediately metamorphoses the verse form of Latin epic into a different genre. Furthermore, prose translations have a tendency to mute the elevated tone, élan, drama, and emotion of the poetic text. As long ago as the nineteenth century, J. W. Mackail (London 1885) suggested this when he commenced the preface to his prose translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* by ironically commenting: "There is something grotesque in the idea of a prose translation of a poet" since it fails "to convey what is … one of the most essential things in poetry—its poetic quality." The use of prose also tends to expand, rather than to limit, the number of words in the English translation beyond the equivalent number of Latin words.

Whereas the Latin dactylic verse form serves as a natural aid in coping visually with thousands of lines of epic, with English prose it becomes advisable, if not essential, for the modern translator to include headings and spacing to vary the layout of the text. For the Latinless reader or student wanting to check a prose translation against the Latin text, it can be difficult to compare and match up the English with the original. Augoustakis and Bernstein surmount all of the aforementioned challenges to the extent that is possible when employing prose to render poetry by producing a coherent and stimulating translation of the *Punica*; by including helpful contextual headings and vertical and horizontal spacing in the text, including indented paragraphs to mark shifts in the content and theme of the translation; and by inserting line numbers at the beginning of these paragraphs. Even so, the prose translation conveys the feeling of the

historical genre, especially in places where Silius seems to have relied upon the accounts of Livy or Polybius, for example, in various sections of the programmatic Saguntum episode (*Punica* 1.271–707; cf. Livy, *AUC* 21.6–16).

The most suitable verse-form to render the Latin dactylic hexameter in English is what can be described as a form of the "vernacular" dactylic hexameter (or pseudo-hexameter), which (without referring to it as such) I advocated for almost three decades ago in *BMCR 1993.03.20* (= *BMCR* 4.3 [1993] 187–192). Since English is more monosyllabic than Latin, largely because of the influence of Anglo-Saxon, what is needed for the translator is a limiting form that requires slightly fewer syllables in English than for the equivalent number of Latin words. Given that each hexametric line of Silius' *Punica*, as with other Roman epics, contains thirteen to seventeen syllables and six (or five pronounceable) stresses, what is needed for the English dactylic hexameter is a line of eleven to fifteen syllables and (wherever possible) six stresses.

Apart from the prose form of Augoustakis and Bernstein's translation, to what extent does its actual expression suit the English verse form argued for above? To explore this question, I attempted to "fit" their translation of *Punica* 8.243–257 featuring Silius' description of Varro (p. 135), a challenging passage to translate concisely, into this structured hendecasyllabic to quindecasyllabic verse form by dividing lines between sense units of phrases and periods wherever possible. Only a few lines (those with fifteen syllables) in this passage fit within the constraints of the hendecassylabic to quindecasyllabic verse form. The expansion in English of the number of syllables (259) in comparison with the number of syllables (224) in the original Latin (Delz 1987) text is contrary to expectation given the slightly greater monosyllabicity of English. In comparison, Kline (2018) uses twenty-two lines and 250 syllables (nine to fourteen syllables per line) to translate the fifteen verses of Latin. An accurate line-for-line correspondence between the Latin and English in this passage is achievable using the pseudo-hexametric form of eleven to fifteen syllables per line (*q.v.* Dominik, "Hannibal at the Gates," *Flavian Rome* [2003] 492–493, with 222 syllables). Both A. J. Boyle (*The Eclogues of Virgil* [1976]) and Norman Austin and Ruth Morse (*Roman Poets of the Early Empire* [1992] 222–249) have employed this flexible yet limiting verse form to translate the Latin hexameter with the same number of English lines as there are in the original text.

The debate about the appropriate form and mode for the translation of Latin epic in English is perennial and naturally depends upon the ideological views of its individual scholars and translators. Given that Silius is in the process of being restored by critics to a position of respectability in the Flavian literary canon, it is hoped that this renaissance will include the appearance of a succession of translations of the *Punica* in verse form to accompany this new prose translation of Augoustakis and Bernstein. There are indications of this happening, as witnessed by the recent verse translation of Kline (2018), which is soon to be followed by the poetically elegant line-for-line translation by Robin Bond (anticipated 2022) of Christchurch, New Zealand.

This new translation of Augoustakis and Bernstein constitutes a perceptive commentary and preliminary interpretation of Silius Italicus' *Punica*. The sensitivity of these scholar-translators to both the linguistic diversity of the Latin text and its contemporary themes inform their accurate translation at every stage. Their volume not only fills the gap in the market of an up-to-date prose translation of the epic, but it immediately supersedes the outmoded translation of Duff (1934). Given its exorbitant price (US$128), it is hoped that an affordable paperback version will appear in the near future.